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THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

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MEMORANDUM TO THE PRESIDENT

FROM:

WHR

SUBJECT: Southeast Asia.

DECLASSIFIED

E. O. 11652, SEC. 1.5, 1.6, 1.7, AND 1.8

26. D. Chernist (WAK-77-637)
BY 1047 N. P. DATE 9/8/78

Secretary McNamara has asked a delay until Tuesday or Wednesday of next week before presenting to you military plans for Southeast Asia. The delay is a good idea because some solid notions about Viet-Nam and the Southern Laos problem are beginning to emerge, but require careful political and military staffing.

It is planned that you see Ambassador Harriman on ~~Friday~~ *Thursday* (tomorrow) at ~~3:45~~ ^{4:45} p.m. to discuss his negotiating plans. It is essential that he return to Geneva as soon as possible to resume the dialogue with Pushkin.

The contingency plan for an overt resumption of the offensive in Laos is in tolerably good shape; but it is now agreed that it is more likely that the other side will concentrate on doing Diem in than on capturing the Mekong Valley during this fighting season.

As for Viet-Nam, it is agreed we must move quite radically to avoid perhaps slow but total defeat. The sense of the town is that, with Southern Laos open, Diem simply cannot cope. His build up of troops is, of the nature of the training problem, going slower than the guerrilla build up.

You will be presented next week with alternative proposals. One of them is likely to be this three-pronged action, which I launched at a meeting yesterday after checking with Gilpatric, Harriman, etc.

1. We signal to the Russians via Harriman (and perhaps in your talk with Gromyko) that we cannot accept destruction of Diem via infiltration any more than they could accept the destruction of Ulbricht via the Berlin flow of refugees. At Geneva Harriman will negotiate for a settlement, placing great emphasis on the Vietminh exploitation of Southern Laos, and the need for assurance that it will stop.

2. On the basis of William Jorden's White Paper -- to be available next week -- we go into the UN, in the wake of the Southeast Asia passage of your recent speech. The object of the exercise would be to ask for an immediate UN inspection mission in Southern Laos. The argument would be that we are hopeful that a settlement at Geneva will end the violation of the South Viet-Nam frontier; but the matter cannot wait, notably because the ICC in Laos is totally paralyzed.

We would not expect that this UN effort would totally stop the flow into Viet-Nam; but we would expect it to do two useful things. First, the coming of the UN mission during this fighting season would probably force the Viet Cong to get off the trails, to sanitize Tchepone, and generally to damp down its external pressure at a crucial moment for Diem. Second, it would provide the occasion for laying before the world the basis for the major action suggested in paragraph 3, below. Moreover, the action would begin to get the UN responsibly involved in Southeast Asia, which, I believe, is essential in the long run.

3. Against the background of these two moves we immediately explore the possibility of placing a SEATO border patrol force in Viet-Nam. Its rationale would be this: while it is inappropriate for an international force to engage in a civil war, it is wholly appropriate that it help protect the frontiers of an independent nation. No one knows how effective a modern force (equipped with helicopters and light aircraft, modern communications, good intelligence and staff work) would be in stopping the flow across the Viet-Nam frontiers. My own view is that we will not find out until we try, under a first rate imaginative young commander. But, however effective or ineffective this force may be, it would have the following positive effects:

-- It would release some Viet-Nam forces from border patrol to pursuit of the guerrillas within the country;

-- It would provide a restraint on Hanoi in the sense that the Vietminh would know that if they moved up to the stage of open warfare (which would require more substantial external supplies than guerrilla war), they would run into this force; and they could not bring their armies across the 17th parallel without immediately engaging the U.S.

-- It would not only hearten Diem but permit us to put pressure on him to organize his military effort more efficiently;

-- Finally, and perhaps most important, it would give us for the first time some bargaining position with the Russians for a settlement in Viet-Nam.

4. The last point justifies some elaboration. Where would we like to end up in Viet-Nam? We would like a deal for Diem not unlike the deal which the Russians are trying to negotiate for Ulbricht; that is, a de facto recognition that the country is split; and that its unification, if it is not to be indefinitely postponed, must take place by negotiation among the Vietnamese themselves without a pistol pointed at Diem's head; and that, in the meanwhile, the attempt to overthrow Diem from the outside must stop. At the moment we have no bargaining counter whatsoever in talking to the Russians in this way. If we introduce a SEATO force now, we could make its withdrawal a bargaining counter in a Vietnamese settlement. At the moment, even if Khrushchev wanted Ho Chi Minh to lay off, he has no argument: Hanoi is doing very well and is not yet taking any steps which the Russians can regard as dangerous to their interests. The presence of a SEATO force in South Viet-Nam would make it clear, however, that the attempt to destroy the South Vietnamese government by force could not be carried forward to a conclusion without risking an escalation of the fight. This would not merely threaten Hanoi with air and naval action, but would threaten Soviet or Chinese Communist involvement. And this I doubt Moscow wants. It is at this point that Khrushchev might have a legitimate basis for a settlement we could live with.

5. For us the gut issue as I see it is this: We are deeply committed in Viet-Nam; if the situation deteriorates, we will have to go in; the situation is, in fact, actively deteriorating; if we go in now, the costs -- human and otherwise -- are likely to be less than if we wait.

6. But whatever you decide next week, I come back to my old pitch: it is essential that Generals Taylor and Lansdale take a good, hard look at Viet-Nam on the ground, soon.